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Alec Campbell, 1899-2002

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Alec Campbell, 1899-2002

Abstract

When Alec Campbell died in May 2002, he was accorded a nationally televised state funeral. Powerful forces, including media organisations, the Returned Services League, the Department of Veterans Affairs, had long been preparing for this death. Campbell was dubbed The Last Anzac. A flood of media stories and government press releases followed Campbell's death. These tended to be fulsome in their elaboration of Anzac mythology, and general in reference to his military career and to his long life after World War I. On the subject of Campbell the political activist, there was silence. One year in the life of the man as a 16 year old boy-soldier apparently overwhelmed, negated, and buried at least two decades of the man's life in the forefront of some very tough, and high profile, politics on the Left. Workers Online, the weekly web journal published by the NSW Labor Council, was one of the few places in Australia where readers could glimpse Alec Campbell, the political activist. The following story by Rowan Cahill was published on May 24, the day of the funeral.

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Workers Online, the weekly web journal published by the NSW Labor Council, was one of the few places in Australia where readers could glimpse Alec Campbell, the political activist. The following story by Rowan Cahill was published on May 24, the day of the funeral.

Lest we Forget

When Alec Campbell, The Last Anzac, died last week at the age of 103, he was the subject of obituaries around the world. Most of what was written about him centred on his World War I military career which spanned less than a year.

For about six weeks during this brief career, Alec was at Gallipoli. He arrived too late for the worst of the disastrous campaign, and he missed out on the legendary night-time evacuation. According to his own accounts, he never even killed one of the enemy. For the most part he did the dangerous job of ferrying drinking water from the beach to the front line troops.

Alec was 16 years old at the time, and looked it. The Launceston born boy lied about his age to enlist and claimed he was 18. The hungry war machine gobbled him up. In later years he talked about the lure of adventure and travel promised by the war.

He once recalled how he spent his brief time at Gallipoli. The object was simply to survive. Severe illness and medical complications cut short his military career. Prior to being repatriated to Australia in 1916 he spent time recuperating in Egypt. Here he enjoyed the sites, and was twice charged for breaking military law; for being drunk, and for being Absent Without Leave.

Alec arrived home aged 17, changed by the reality of war. In later years he considered his safe return was one of the best things that happened to him. Thereafter Alec rarely talked about the war and his military experiences. When a book titled *The Last Anzacs* was published in 1996, Alec was not mentioned. He had become the invisible Anzac.

But someone dobbed him, and between 1996 and 2002 as the ranks of Anzac survivors thinned and his own health failed, he was targeted. Powerful nationalist and martial forces iconised him as The Last Anzac. But as Alec once pointed out, there was nothing really extraordinary in being the last; simply, he had been one of the youngest at Gallipoli.

During this transformative process a great deal of the real Alec Campbell went into the dustbin of history. The brief military service of the boy became the sum total of the man. So who was Alec Campbell, apart from once being a boy soldier?

Well, it was a crowded life. In South Australia, New South Wales, and Tasmania he was variously a jackaroo, carpenter, railway carriage builder, mature age university student, public servant, research officer, historian; he married twice, and fathered nine children. Alec was also an amateur boat builder, self-taught navigator, and a Sydney-to-Hobart yachtsman during the early years of the race. He also enjoyed hunting, and somewhere along the line did some boxing.

Politically and industrially Alec was a socialist, a trade unionist, and an anti-fascist. During the Spanish Civil War he considered going to Spain to join in the fight against the fascist forces of General Franco. One of

his daughters has described him as an “enthusiastic” unionist “who put everything into it”. During the 1930s and 1940s he was variously a member of the Amalgamated Carpenters and Joiners (now part of the CFMEU), a union activist in railway workshops in Hobart and Launceston, and had a deep and long involvement with the Workers Educational Association.

He was a worker advocate in the wartime Fair Rents Court, and part of a theatrical group specialising in contemporary political comment. The conservative press regarded him as ‘a Red’. In the Launceston local council elections of 1941 he campaigned with union endorsement for slum clearance, low rental public housing, anti-pollution measures, and anti-monopoly measures.

Alec became President of the Tasmanian Branch of the Australian Railways Union (1939-1941), and of Launceston Trades Hall Council (1939-42). In those tough industrial times, he was known to be quick-tempered; sometimes his fists did the talking.

Over the years, people Alec worked with included the extraordinary peace activist Lady Jessie Street, and fellow ARU identity Bill Morrow, anti-conscriptionist, life-long peace activist, and an ALP Senator (1947-1953). During the late 1930s, labour movement intellectual Esmonde Higgins was important in Campbell’s development as a worker-educator.

In 1999 Alec voted for an Australian republic, believing it was time Australia stood on its own two feet.

Alec thought war was a futile activity, and devoted much of his life to the cause of peace. He reasoned that as political solutions always followed wars, people should cut to the chase and get on with the political solutions without the slaughter.

Vale Alec Campbell (1899-2002). Lest We Forget.

